

# THE LAST 48 DAYS OF THE FRENCH EMPIRE

By PAUL-FRANÇOIS CARCOPINO

*The events from November 7 to December 24 of last year cost France her colonial empire in Africa and reduced the area under the control of the French Government to the smallest size in many centuries. At the time when these events took place, reports were so scanty and contradictory that it was impossible to form an idea about their sequence. Since then, however, much additional information has been published, including lengthy official communiqués of the French Government.*

*On the basis of all material available in Shanghai, Mr. Carcopino, the French author of "France Under the Armistice" ("The XXth Century," July 1942), presents the events of those historic days as they appear to have taken place.—K.M.*

**A**LL through the summer of 1942 there were rumors of an impending Anglo-American attack on French Africa. On October 21, Admiral Darlan, commander in chief of the French armed forces, was sent by Marshal Pétain to Africa to inspect conditions there and the readiness of the Army and Navy to meet any emergency. The Admiral made a number of strong declarations about the determination of the French Government to defend its African empire. Thus, on October 26, he said in Rabat (Morocco): "Should a direct threat become evident for West Africa, we are in a position to react promptly. Although I knew this before starting my trip, I have now convinced myself with my own eyes."

On November 7, Darlan was in the city of Algiers.

## NOVEMBER 8

During the night of November 7/8, the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa began. We are not concerned here with the military course of events, which was described in the January issue of this magazine. France lost her colonial empire, not as a result of any Anglo-American victories, but because of treason by her own citizens, and it is their attitude that we shall trace here.

In Rabat, a pro-Allied uprising coincided with the start of the invasion. Its leader, General Bethouard, and the other conspirators had been in touch with

British agents who arrived a few days earlier in a submarine. The revolt was quickly suppressed by General Noguès, the Resident General of Morocco, and General Bethouard was arrested.

In the city of Algiers, contrary to the first news, it seems that better organized and more numerous dissidents under General Mast, the deputy commander of the French forces, were able from the beginning to take over all essential public buildings and utilities, while American detachments landed in the neighborhood. After that, resistance in Algiers was disorganized and weak and the situation extremely confused. By 10 p.m. that same night, at the very latest, American troops were in control of the city.

Apart from Algiers, the French military machine automatically went into action against the invasion and offered brave resistance. The troops loyally followed the command of Marshal Pétain which he had sent out at 8.30 a.m. on November 8 and which ended with the clear order: "France and her honor are at stake. We are attacked and we shall defend ourselves. That is the order I give."

In the afternoon Jacques Doriot, the leader of the People's Party in Paris, said from the balcony of the Party Building :

We are convinced that we would be stronger today if we had severed relations completely with Britain two years ago, and if we had arrested numerous American spies and had concluded an

alliance with Germany. I know there are men in the Government who think as we do. But there are also those in power who think opposite, and these men must be driven out of the Government immediately. Some of us have not been afraid to fight against the Soviet Union in icy steppes. We are now ready to fight in the hot desert as well.

That same evening Admiral Darlan sent a telegram to Vichy. The contents of this telegram have not been made public. However, to use the words of the official French communiqué of December 6, "it allowed one to anticipate the future surrender of Algiers." Apparently it included Darlan's suggestion to conclude a local armistice. (Vichy, however, did not know whether the telegram was genuine nor whether Admiral Darlan was still free.) During the night the second telegram arrived from Admiral Darlan informing the French Government that he was considering the possibility of opening negotiations.

#### BETWEEN VICHY AND ALGIERS

On Monday the 9th, at 8 a.m., the Marshal, in answering the cables he had received during the night, categorically forbade Darlan to open any negotiations. He also informed him that Laval was on his way to Munich to meet Chancellor Hitler. But when shortly afterwards the news of the Algiers armistice reached Vichy, the Marshal had to conclude that Admiral Darlan was either not willing or not able to obey his instructions. Without further delay the Marshal announced: "In the absence of Admiral Darlan, I have taken over from today the supreme command of the land, air, and naval forces."

One more important decision was made by the Marshal on November 9. After a meeting which lasted one hour, the French Ministerial Council issued an announcement at 7.15 p.m. to the effect that the US Government, by expanding the war to North Africa, had severed diplomatic relations with France.

To Vichy and to the world in general the situation in Algiers remained extremely confused. The Marshal received a new telegram from Darlan in which he suggested steps against a number of high officers for their treacherous attitude the

day before. (These officers were later actually deprived of their French nationality by Vichy.) From this the Marshal should have assumed that the Admiral was still loyal to him. But, very early on the morning of the 10th, two telegrams arrived from Darlan in quick succession. In the first one the Admiral proposed a plan for negotiations with the American authorities. In the second, without waiting for a refusal from Vichy, he informed the Government that he had decided to treat with the Anglo-Americans and, moreover, that he had issued the order to cease fire.

Again the answer of the Marshal was categorical: "I have ordered resistance, and I maintain this order." But as far as Darlan was concerned these words had no effect, for he now informed Vichy that he had handed himself over as a prisoner to the Anglo-Americans. In the Marshal's eyes this meant the end of Darlan, and he immediately appointed General Noguès as the Government's only delegate to command the troops in French North Africa.

#### THE REST OF FRENCH AFRICA

Meanwhile, reassuring messages had arrived from other parts of the Empire.

General Noguès, who was conducting the operations in Morocco, assured the Marshal of his own loyalty as well as that of his troops and the native population under him. At the same time the Governor General of Algiers, M. Chatel, issued from Vichy a proclamation to the people of Algiers which included the following words:

In loyal obedience to our Chief, Marshal Pétain, you will do your duty without fear of any sacrifices in defending our country and maintaining France's honor. May God bless you and grant victory to our armies!

Boisson, Governor General of French West Africa, cabled: "Marshal Pétain and the Government can count on us. We are ready." And General Barré, commander in chief of the French forces in Tunisia, added: "Our soldierly duty is clear and simple: We must follow the order of the Marshal." (All these men



The Allied Invasion of North Africa in November 1942

were to betray the Marshal a few days later.)

To Vichy it must have seemed by the evening of November 10 that, with the exception of Algiers, the French forces and French administration in Africa had remained loyal and were continuing their resistance against the invaders. However, it was also clear—not only to the Marshal but also to Chancellor Hitler—that the resistance was most ineffective, and that it was only a question of hours before Morocco and Algiers would be in the hands of the British and Americans.

#### THE DEFENSE OF UNOCCUPIED FRANCE

On the morning of November 11 the French radio broadcast a letter from the Führer to Marshal Pétain. In it, the Führer pointed out that the armistice agreement of 1940 between Germany and France had been based on the assumption that the armistice would be not merely a passing episode but constitute the actual cessation of the war and that the armistice agreement should in no circumstances result in a deterioration of

Germany's military situation owing to its lenient terms. The Anglo-American attack on French North Africa and the threat to the unoccupied coast of southern France had, the Führer stated, nullified the conditions of the armistice. He continued :

I have to inform you, much to my regret, that, in agreement with the Italian Government, I see myself compelled to send my troops by the quickest way through France to occupy the Mediterranean coast in order to ward off a possible enemy assault; secondly, to take over the protection of Corsica against a menacing attack by Anglo-American forces.

I wish to state in advance that my action is not directed against you as Chief of the French State and venerated leader of the brave French soldiers of the World War, nor against the French Government, nor against Frenchmen who desire peace and wish to prevent their country from becoming once again a theater of war.

In this connection, I should also like to assure you that the entry of Axis troops into unoccupied France is not directed against the French armed forces, but that I still entertain the hope of being able some day to defend, together with them, Europe and Europe's African possessions against the predatory Anglo-Saxon coalition.

Finally, this march into France is not directed against the French administration, which I hope, will continue to fulfill its duties as hitherto.

The sole aim of this German action is to prevent on the coast of southern France a repetition of what took place in North Africa.

Meanwhile, the German troops had crossed the demarcation line between occupied and unoccupied France and were rushing through southern France at full speed and without meeting any resistance. A few hours later, the entire coast was firmly in German hands, and the construction of new fortifications began immediately. Only the naval port of Toulon was excepted from occupation.

In the face of this German emergency step, the Marshal sent the following message to the French nation :

People of France and of the Empire! I thought that I had already lived through the darkest hours of my life. However, the events which are taking place today remind me of the days of June 1940. Nevertheless, we must remain calm.

In the absence of Admiral François Darlan, who is in Algiers, I have assumed command over the French armed forces. I salute with grief all those soldiers, sailors, aviators, and civilians who are falling for the defense of our country and our honor. Frenchmen, have confidence in your Marshal, who thinks only of France.

#### FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

The 12th brought a new telegram from Admiral Darlan in which he informed Vichy that he had recovered his freedom, that he had taken over the command of French North Africa, and that he was negotiating with the American authorities.

By now Vichy had received a considerable number of telegrams from Darlan, but it had been impossible to know for sure whether the Admiral had actually sent them and if so, whether he had done it of his own free will. As a result, Vichy had continued to doubt the authenticity of these messages and refused to believe in Darlan's treason.

But Friday the 13th, indeed a black day for France, furnished the Marshal with a sad solution to the riddle. On that day, the Admiral made a speech over the radio in Algiers. His voice could be easily recognized, and there was now no doubt left regarding his personal stand. On the following day, one week after the start of the invasion, the

Marshal disavowed the Admiral by telegram. This action was later followed up by the revocation of the Admiral's French citizenship.

Perhaps it will never become quite clear what had been the thoughts in the mind of Admiral Darlan during that past week. However, considering the sequence of events which we have just described and considering the ambitious character of the Admiral, one might try to reconstruct his ideas.

#### THE RIDDLE OF DARLAN

When France collapsed in the summer of 1940, Darlan was commander in chief of the French fleet, and the French fleet was the only factor of power left to France. This automatically and without any particular political merit on his part made the Admiral one of the most important figures in France. Pétain, deprived of all other instruments of strength, leaned on the Admiral, making him Minister of Navy in successive governments, later giving him more offices, including those of Minister for Interior and Foreign Affairs, and even, in February 1941, designating him his successor. Admiral Darlan, the great-grandson of a man who had died fighting the English at Trafalgar, disliked the British intensely, and in his speeches he did not conceal what he thought of France's ex-allies who murdered Frenchmen in their treacherous attacks on Oran and Dakar. At the same time he declared his gratitude for the leniency shown by Germany toward France, his sympathy for a new order in Europe, and his loyalty toward the stipulations of the armistice and particularly toward the Marshal.

While there was no chance and no desire on the part of the British to win over Darlan, it was different with the Americans. Pétain, an upright soldier, did not see through the machinations for which the continuation of diplomatic relations gave the Americans a chance. The American Ambassador Admiral Leahy, and in particular the counsellor of his Embassy, Mr. Murphy, (later Consul General in Algiers) worked tirelessly for



dissension among the French. They stressed the traditional Franco-American friendship and exploited the anxiety which the French felt for their possessions in the Western Hemisphere. It is quite possible that Darlan fell prey to their efforts. Perhaps the Marshal no longer felt wholly sure of the Admiral, for in April 1942 he made Laval Chief of the Government, thus depriving Darlan of most of his political power.

#### DARLAN'S DOUBLE GAME

When he was in Algiers on November 7, did Darlan know that the Anglo-American invasion was to start that night? So far we are not able to answer this question with certainty. But we have a fairly good idea of what happened, once the invasion had begun. It seems that Darlan was immediately arrested (perhaps only for show) and freed after he had given orders to cease fire and had declared his willingness to co-operate with General Eisenhower.

During the first few hours, as long as the position of the Marshal was not clear, Darlan could try to fool himself that his actions would perhaps be approved in Vichy. But Darlan did not have to wait long for a clarification of the Marshal's position. It came at 8.30 a.m. on November 8 with the Marshal's strict order for resistance. Now there was only one thing for Darlan to do: prove his loyalty to the Marshal, obey his orders to fight the invaders and, if this was impossible, become a prisoner in the American camp. Instead, the Admiral played a crooked game. He tried to deceive the Marshal in numerous telegrams, giving him an entirely false picture of the situation and of his own actions, while all the time he was co-operating with the American invaders.

When the German armies occupied southern France, Darlan may have played with the idea that the Marshal would declare himself a prisoner of the Germans. In that case Darlan, the designated successor of the Marshal, would automatically have been vested with the Marshal's powers.

If these were the Admiral's ideas, his error was based on a profound misjudgment of the Marshal. He should have known that, to a man like Pétain, nothing would be left but to disavow any man, even Darlan, if he disobeyed. Pétain himself made this quite clear when he said in a message to all Frenchmen:

Admiral Darlan dares to declare that I am not able to make known my real thoughts to the French people, and he pretends to act in my name. I am not the man to surrender to coercion. To insinuate the contrary is to insult me. (November 16.)

It is not often that men who, like Darlan, are trained throughout their lives to obey are at the same time statesmen of vision. From the moment when, for the first time, the Admiral had wavered from the clear path of obedience in disregarding the Marshal's order of November 8, he was to pass through a labyrinth of zigzags and delusions which eventually were to end in blood.

Until November 14 the Admiral might have consoled himself with the idea that perhaps there was some kind of treason which was not really treason. After the Marshal's disavowal on that day, his position as a traitor became obvious to himself and to all the world. His policy became that of an adventurer. He was soon to find out what his masters thought of him. Only a few days later Vernon Bartlett called him "an extremely useful instrument."

#### THE FLEET STILL LEFT

By now the fight between the French forces and the invaders had ceased completely and, with the exception of Tunisia, French West Africa and French Somaliland, the African empire of France was in the hands of Roosevelt and Churchill. But there was still the French fleet at Toulon. On November 15, Admiral Laborde, the commander of the French naval forces in Toulon, published an order in which he said:

We owe this state of affairs [of not being occupied] solely to a feeling of admiration which the heroic attitude of our comrades of the Second Light Naval Squadron in Algeria and Morocco, who remained loyal to their oath unto death, stirred in the hearts of high Axis military authorities.

These authorities last night requested Admiral Marquis and myself to pledge our word of honor to this effect. It now depends on you whether this state of affairs can be maintained. I am guarantor of your obedience towards Marshal Pétain, whom I saw today and who instructed me to tell you that he is counting on you to save the unity and honor of France. I take it for granted that none of you will be so unscrupulous as to forget this duty.

#### THE CASE OF GIRAUD

Once treason had taken place at the top in the person of Admiral Darlan, it spread rapidly throughout French Africa. But so strong was the prestige of the Marshal that most of the traitors were forced to pretend that they were acting with the Marshal's consent. The first to do this after Darlan was General Giraud.

General Giraud, who had been taken prisoner of war in 1940 by the advancing German armies, had been allowed considerable freedom of movement in Germany after he had given his word of honor not to flee. He broke his word and fled to unoccupied France. Germany did not insist on his return, but the Marshal was worried that the General's attitude might harm Franco-German relations. He had a serious talk with Giraud and received from him a letter, written on May 4, 1942, in which the General assured him of his loyalty. The letter ended:

I give you my word of honor as an officer that I will undertake nothing whatsoever that might disturb our relations with the German Government, or hinder the work which you, Admiral Darlan, and President Laval have to fulfill. My past is a guarantee for my sincerity, and I ask you, Monsieur le Maréchal, to accept the assurance of my full attachment.

Giraud broke this word of honor too and, leaving France apparently aboard a foreign submarine, appeared in North Africa, alleging that he had been invested by the Marshal with the command of the French troops there. The Marshal refuted this lie in his message of November 16 by declaring that the General had forfeited his honor, adding: "I categorically forbid General Giraud to use my name and to allege that he is acting on my behalf." Incidentally, from the moment Giraud arrived in North Africa,

rivalry arose between him and Darlan. Whether this was real or only simulated in order to deceive the Marshal, is hard to tell. At any rate it was used by Darlan as an excuse for disregarding the Marshal's orders, for he claimed that he was trying to prevent Giraud from usurping command of the troops.

#### LAVAL

On November 17, a cabinet meeting under the presidency of the Marshal was held in Vichy. In it the Marshal, to quote the communiqué of November 19, "decided to confer upon Premier Laval powers required for enabling the Chief of the Government [Laval] to take measures necessitated by the present difficulties of France." Thereupon Constitutional Act No. 4 concerning the succession to the post of Chief of State was changed. Laval, it was decided, would be entrusted with the task of deputizing for the Chief of State in case the latter were prevented from carrying out his duty. Laval thus became, in place of Darlan, the designated successor of the Marshal.

During the following days a few more attempts were made by Vichy to restore the fighting morale of the French forces in North Africa. On November 19 at 8.30 p.m. the Marshal issued a new order branding the traitors for being in the service of a foreign power and for refusing to obey his orders. "Once more I order you to resist Anglo-American aggression," he continued. Two days later, again at 8.30 p.m., Laval made a speech over the radio outlining his position and policy and asking for the support of the Marshal by the French people. "Do not forget," he exclaimed, "that throughout history *émigrés* have always been wrong." But it was of no avail.

#### THE COLLAPSE

Meanwhile, Boisson, the Governor General of French West Africa, had established contact with Darlan, yet remained in touch with Vichy. Through the mediation of Darlan he negotiated an agreement with the Americans in complete disregard of the Marshal's express order to resist

all aggression. On November 23 he put himself under Darlan's orders and announced on November 24 that he had signed an agreement with the Americans which, he claimed, excluded any occupation, either foreign or de Gaullist, of French West Africa, a claim which was immediately belied by facts.

It was in this connection that the world became aware for the first time of a rift between the factions of Darlan and de Gaulle: it became known that General Barreau, the commander in chief of the forces in French West Africa, instead of following the step taken by Governor General Boisson in placing himself under Darlan, had gone over with his troops to General Charles de Gaulle.

A few days later, French Somaliland was occupied by British and de Gaullist forces. The only leader who remained loyal to the Marshal was Admiral Esteva, the Resident General of Tunisia, whose sailors held Bizerta until German and Italian forces arrived. These sailors later returned triumphantly to France via Italy. Today Tunisia is the only African possession still under Vichy administration.

Finally, treason caused France to lose her last trump card in the political game of the powers—her fleet. When the Germans became aware of what was going on in Toulon they ordered the occupation of the port during the night November 26/27. Thereupon the French fleet scuttled itself.

#### QUARRELS AND FACTIONS

Meanwhile, Darlan proceeded on his path of adventure. On November 30 he proclaimed himself "High Commissioner for North Africa," still claiming that he was doing this by virtue of the powers conferred upon him by the Marshal, and declared that the Resident General of Morocco was under him. General Noguès agreed and was later deprived of his citizenship by Vichy. This also happened to the Governor General of Algiers, Chatel, who meanwhile had returned to Algiers and joined Darlan's camp. On

December 2 an "Empire Council" met upon Darlan's initiative and under his presidency at Algiers. This Council included Noguès, Boisson, Chatel, and later Giraud, and was given the appearance of a regular government. Two days later the Admiral declared himself "Chief of the French State in North Africa." The protest which this immediately evoked from General de Gaulle showed more clearly than ever the growing rift in the camp of the rebels. When de Gaulle saw himself deprived of the BBC microphone over which he wanted to protest against Darlan's usurpation of power, he appointed General Catroux as commander in chief of the French forces in Africa.

During all this time the Marshal had followed the one policy which he considered right, and on December 5 he answered the Führer's letter of November 27 by assuring him of the French Government's firm determination to "pursue a policy which will secure France's future in the reorganized Europe" and stating his belief that "a historical entente between our people should not be impossible."

The events in France and North Africa were now proceeding along entirely different lines. While metropolitan France, under the leadership of Pétain and Laval, co-operated with Germany, and while German and Italian forces rapidly occupied a large part of Tunisia, welcomed particularly by Tunisia's large Italian population, the rest of French North Africa offered a picture of unrest and deep-rooted discord. Soon there were at least four factions. There were the British with their puppet, General de Gaulle, who claimed that the latter should head the French in North Africa and everywhere else. (But even de Gaulle and the British did not see eye to eye.) There were the Americans, who distrusted de Gaulle as a tool of the British but who were not quite sure what they should do, and who were playing along with Darlan. There was Darlan, who co-operated with the Americans but who had personal ambitions, and there was General Giraud with his hopes of emerg-

ing as a compromise between de Gaulle and Darlan. Even Moscow, in simultaneous *démarches* made by the Soviet Ambassador in London and Washington on December 10, made it clear that it had its own ideas about North Africa, where, incidentally, many Red Spaniards had lived under arrest by the French authorities.

The man who seems to have foreseen more clearly than anyone else the mess that North Africa was likely to become, was Winston Churchill. From the very beginning he rid himself of responsibility by his declaration of November 11 that in the North African affair he was only Roosevelt's "active and ardent lieutenant."

Indeed, Roosevelt made himself quite at home in French North Africa. Through General Eisenhower he interfered in French domestic affairs in violation of international law and without regard for Darlan by decreeing the mobilization of Frenchmen in North Africa; by ordering the release of Spanish Communists; and

by restoring to the Jews their French nationality and their former privileges.

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The first period of the African adventure came to a close when Admiral Darlan, perhaps the ablest man of all and deeply hated by the British, was murdered by one of their tools on Christmas Eve. When the curtain went down over the bloody scene of his assassination, a chapter in French history had come to a close. Although the quarrels continue and confusion still reigns, hampering the activity of the Allies, it is Washington and London, who now rule over the French Colonial Empire.

Do the French not understand that, after the military defeat of 1940 and the moral defeat of 1942, it is no longer enough to wait passively and rely on the Germans to do the fighting for them? Do they not realize that it has become necessary to join the Germans in the struggle for the defense of European civilization and the restoration of the French Empire?

